DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 838 CS 202 955

AUTHOR Weeks, Thelma E.
TITLE The Speech of Indian Children: Paralinguistic and Registral Aspects of the Yakima Dialect.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (65th, San Diego, California, November 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indian Languages; *American Indians; *Child Language; Early Childhood Education; Ethnic Studies; *Language Handicaps; *Nonstandard Dialects; Sociocultural Patterns; *Speech
IDENTIFIERS *Yakima Indians

ABSTRACT

Studies of the speech of 11 Yakima Indian children on a reservation in central Washington indicated a number of characteristics which were not found systematically in the speech of non-Indian children. These included differences in phonology; intonation contours; use of direct quotations; story-telling register; language play; availability of polite phrases; and opportunity, or necessity, for use of a formal register. These various dialect features are likely to disappear as the children grow older, however, since the children demonstrate an awareness of the forms of standard English and Yakima adults do not have a noticeable dialect. The poor school performance of Yakima children is interpreted as a failure of the schools to adjust to the speech registers available to the Yakima child, rather than as the result of "a language problem." (AA)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

ED128838

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

# The Speech of Indian Children: Paralinguistic and Registral Aspects of the Yakima Dialect

Thelma E. Weeks[1]

Center for Cross-Cultural Research

Palo Alto, California

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Thelma E. Weeks

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

With a title that includes the words paralinguistic and registral, some definitions are in order. Probably the best way to define both words is to give examples.

If you want to call your cat, you may call, "Here, Kitty!" Those words are the verbal aspect of the call. But there is usually a special register that is required for calling cats, dogs, pigs, or even children who are not within a few feet of you. Some of the paralinguistic features included in such a calling register are loud volume, higher than usual pitch, maybe an especially noticeable flap in the intervocalic t, and perhaps a special intonation pattern. There is an "extra-linguistic" reason for the loud volume and the high pitch: the pet won't hear you if you don't use them. But there are no such reasons for most of the paralinguistic features we find included in many other registers. For example, when we hear a mother who is using a baby-talk register with her baby, say "Is oo my widdo tweetie?" we notice that she is using a higher pitch than usual, she has made a grammatical modification in using is instead of are, some phonetic modifications in simplifying you to oo, and changing little to widdo and sweetie to tweetie. These changes



CS 202 955

aren't made so the baby will understand better or hear better, but because it seems appropriate. She is talking to the baby in what seems to her to be a baby-like way. Some aspects of a baby-talk register are also considered appropriate by some individuals for talking to their lovers or to old people. No one would consider it appropriate, however, for giving a sermon in church or for addressing a group of English teachers. Different registers are required for different uses.

In defining registers, Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens (1964) have said that speech varieties in a language community consist of varieties according to user--that is, varieties in the sense that each speaker uses one variety and uses it all the time--and varieties according to use--that is, in the sense that each speaker has a range of varieties and chooses between them at different times. The variety according to user is a "dialect" and the variety according to use is a "register."

A child acquires skill in the use of registers and all of the paralinguistic features associated with them at the same time he is acquiring vocabulary and all other aspects of language. In fact, many linguists have maintained that intonation patterns are the first aspect of language that most children acquire--or at least the first that they demonstrate a productive competence in.

While we assume that very young children acquire all aspects

of language in a completely unselfconscious way, there are some aspects of a child's language development that parents are usually quite aware of. Parents usually notice when a child has added new words to his vocabulary, or has learned to put words together into sentences, for example. Neither the child nor the parent seems to be aware of the acquisition of certain other aspects of language. For example, when I have asked parents whether or not their young child knows how to whisper, or how he communicates the fact that he has a confidential message, or what changes the child makes in his language when he addresses a strange adult, they don't know. I have never found parents who noticed these things until they were asked to watch for them, but these registers appear at fairly early ages.

Since we are generally so unaware of the use of these registers in the first place, it further escapes our attention that they vary from culture to culture. In some cultures a loud voice signals anger. In others it is an unmarked conversational register between family members. In some cultures baby talk is used in addressing children as old as 10 or 12 years of age. In others, it is given up by the time a child is a year-and-a-half or two years old.

In a multi-ethnic country such as the United States with various sub-cultures existing side-by-side, we can see that the possibilities for misunderstanding are endless, even though we

all speak English, and we all understand every word that is uttered. Registers change the meaning.

There is just one such sub-culture that this paper is concerned with: that of the Yakima Indians of central Washington.

## The Yakima Reservation and the Informants

My interest in the Yakima children goes back to 1968 when I first went to the Yakima Indian Reservation, where I spent part of my time working with an old informant who was helping me learn to speak Sahaptin, their native Indian language, and spent the rest of my time looking for young children who were bilingual speakers of Sahaptin and English. I was unable to find any such children, but I found other interesting problems and have continued working there.

The situation on the Reservation is that the children speak nothing but English. Children who have grandparents living in their homes usually have a receptive knowledge of Sahaptin (they understand it, but don't speak it). Most of the parents of these children are native speakers of Sahaptin and learned to speak English when they got to school. I know of no grandparents, or persons of that generation, who are not bilingual, at least to some degree. Some older Yakimas have difficulty conversing in English, but many have switched to English and use Sahaptin only in certain situations. The fact that the middle generation learned English at school, largely from the teachers themselves

(inasmuch as the other children in their schools were also Indian, from various tribes) accounts for the fact that the English they learned was standard English. However, the adults have become convinced, partly because of their own experience, that bilingualism is a serious disadvantage in school and they are reluctant or completely unwilling to have their children speak Sahaptin (or Yakima, as they call it). There is the further complication that these adults were not merely taught English as a second language; they were taught to speak nothing but English. They were punished severely if they spoke their native Indian language. As a result, many of them have difficulty now in producing it at all.

The social interaction of the Yakimas, both children and adults, is largely with that of other Indians rather than with the non-Indians of the community. There appears to be a mutual disinclination to integrate socially. There is no indication of any feeling of identification on the part of either group with the other. This lack of interaction has contributed to the perpetuation of the Yakima culture, and to the ignorance of the existence of this culture on the part of the people of the community. The Yakimas live in houses, drive cars, wear clothes like those of the mainstream culture, and speak English. The cultural differences are buried from public view.

While my work on the Reservation has been as much with adults as with children, this study deals only with Yakima

children. No generalizations are extended to the adult Yakima population. I worked with 12 Yakima children, and 4 non-Indian children from one of the Head Start programs on the Yakima Indian Reservation. I worked with another 7 non-Indian children from the Palo Alto, California area, bringing the total number of non-Indian children to 11. The children ranged in age from 3 years, 10 months to 6 years, 9 months.

During the two weeks I spent on the Reservation, I made recordings of the children, spending most of the day from about 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Head Start program. There is about an hour of tape recorded for each child. About 20 minutes of this time represents a story retelling task, using the picture story, Curious George. The rest of the time was spent in conversation, some of which was stimulated by the children's looking at some pictures I had brought along, and discussing them. The pictures usually served to remind the children of similar experiences they had had themselves.

When I wasn't recording the children, I did whatever I saw that needed to be done, and the children seemed to accept me as some sort of a helper, although all of the regular adults there were Yakimas, about half men and half women. The children were very affectionate and eager to talk--generally eager to please.

What I had been hearing from school teachers, principals, and the superintendent was that the Yakima children did poorly

in school, and they thought the children had a 'language problem.' So one of my objectives at this point was to discover whether or not there was something about the language of the children which the people of the community couldn't pinpoint, but which could be interpreted as presenting a problem. While I isolated a number of non-language problems that I was convinced were deterring the children from success in school, this paper will concentrate on some of the language differences I found between the Yakima children and non-Indian children.

## Dialect Features of the Yakima Children's Speech

### Phonological Features

The phonological aspects (differences in pronunciation) of the speech of the Yakima children listed in Table 1 were found in all 12 of the Yakima children I worked with, and were not found in the speech of any of the 4 non-Indian children studied there.

There are no fricatives (f, v, θ, ð) in Sahaptin: about half of the Yakima children articulated dental fricatives (th sounds) part of the time, and other half didn't articulate them at all. As Table 1 indicates, with was usually pronounced wit, but sometimes it became wis. Labio-dental fricatives (f, v) offered very little trouble, but sometimes b substituted for v. In the children who varied, the careful articulation was used in conversation with me but was not used in the story retelling.

There is no velar nasal (ng) in Sahaptin, and even in the most careful style of the most careful child speaker, such words

Table 1

Phonological Features

of the Yakima Children's Dialect

| Form | Sahaptin | Yakima Children's Speech |
|---|---|---|
| θ, ð<br>f, v | missing | Labio-dental fricatives (f,v) are produced, but dental fricatives (θ, ð)are produced only in careful style by some, not all, children. Dentals are the usual substitute: with → wit, them → dem. |
| ŋ | missing | Almost always missing in verb forms even in careful style; sometimes articulated in participles or nouns, such as morning. |
| r | missing | Usually very soft or missing altogether, particularly in final position. |
| d | missing | In final and intervocalic positions, d is usually unvoiced (pronounced as a t), e.g., dialed → dialt, couldn't → coultn't, by most of the children most of the time. |

as hunting and fishing were carefully and slowly articulated as /hʌntIn/ and /fišIn/, though some children articulated a velar nasal in noun endings, such as in morning.

With r, which again is not found in Sahaptin, some children consistently did not articulate it at all, while other children used it part of the time, depending on word position and style of speech.

Other less important, perhaps, but interesting features I found rather consistently were (1) a lateral (ℓ) articulated in a more back position than in standard English, or sounding more 'liquid' than is usual in English, and (2) the careful enunciation of intervocalic and final consonants. A final d often became unvoiced and enunciated as a t: dialed became dialt. The intervocalic t in most English words becomes a flap, but the Yakima children often carefully enunciated it as a t: water became /wato/, with a carefully enunciated t instead of the usual /wadr/. This doesn't prevent the listener from comprehending what the child means, but the speech seems less smooth--the child does not sound like a fluent speaker.

It is interesting that the dialectal features noted in the speech of the Yakima children, such as dese, dose, dem, as well as the omission of r's, are features that are usually associated with social class and often found in urban areas. In this case, however, the social factors appear to be minor, and the cultural

factors, principally the first language of the parents, appear to be determinants. However, it should be mentioned here that these are among the speech sounds that offer many children difficulty--not just children from particular dialect areas.

The Use of Direct Quotations

The Yakima children used noticeably more direct quotations in the story retelling task and also in conversation than the non-Indian children did. For some reason, this is frowned upon by middle-class white Americans. When reporting an event, we are supposed to say "I told her she shouldn't do that," instead of "I said to her,'Now don't do that!'" The use of direct quotations connotes lower social class status.

One would assume, in spite of this, that in story retelling, this device would be valued. Professional storytellers make it a point to use direct quotations, and the storytellers of Indian myths and tales certainly make maximum use of it. However, even in a task that was designated as story telling, the non-Indian children used few direct quotations, some of which were simply, "Hi!" or "Bye," whereas the Yakima children used it almost three times as much, and more often these quotations were full sentences. Statistically, 11 Yakima children used 43 direct quotations in the story retelling task, whereas the 11 non-Indian children used 17.

In conversation, the non-Indian children didn't use any

direct quotations, whereas the Yakimas used some, all in appropriate ways. (See Table 2.)

I have no way of knowing how many hours in their lifetime these Yakima children have spent listening to older people tell myths and stories, nor how much storytelling or story reading of other kinds any of the children were exposed to, but I would guess that the number of hours of such exposure would not be very revealing in itself. The answer is more apt to lie in the attitudes of the two cultural groups. As speakers of an unwritten language, the Yakimas have a tradition of well developed oral skills that are not highly valued in the mainstream culture.

Intonation

The Yakima children used more variation in intonation contours than the non-Indian children. This included the story retelling task, where it was expected, and also conversation, where it wasn't. In story retelling, the variation in intonation is one aspect of a story telling register. In conversation, it doesn't appear to convey any meaning, and therefore I'm calling it simply a paralinguistic feature of the Yakima children's speech, rather than a register.

Story Telling Register

It is interesting that all of the Yakima children made some change in their style that could be interpreted as a story telling register, but, by and large, the non-Indian children did not. I know that some of the non-Indian children have a story telling register available because I have record of them using

Table 2

Direct Quotations

Used by Yakima Children

| In Conversation |
| --- |
| (Telling about a trip to the zoo.) "And there was a sign on there, 'Don't put your hand in there. It might bite your finger.'" |
| "And Grandma said, 'Tommy's going to get that boat and take us for a ride on there.'" |
| (Looking at picture of a boy who has climbed a tall tree and pretending to be him) "'Hi! Who down there? Who climbing up the tree?'" |
| **In Story Retelling** |
| "He was calling him and he said, "What fun to play! and the man let him out of the chair." |
| "He said, 'I'm going to take you to the zoo.'" |
| "A man says, 'What a nice monkey!'" |
| "Then he said, 'George! You can go play now, but don't get into trouble.'" |
| "And he said, 'Here's the city. Here's the city.'" |
| "And the monkey grabbed the balloons and he said, 'Hey, you balloons.'" |
| "So the monkey got down. 'Get him! Get him!' And then he got caught." |

it in telling original stories. I assume that most of the others have one available to them also, but they apparently did not interpret this task as calling for it. Many of them seemed to interpet it as a reporting task, and they used very little variation in intonation or volume. I don't know what aspects of each culture might determine their choice of register, but it seems that there is a difference.

Language Play

Another feature of the Yakima children's speech was to use more sound effects than the non-Indian children did, and to play more with language in general, both in the story retelling and in conversation. Some examples are listed in Table 3. This was nearly unheard of in the speech of the non-Indian children. The Yakima children repeated words or phrases with different intonation patterns, almost going into a song. For example, one little boy was looking at a picture of a train during the conversation period, and said first, "That's a choo-choo train." Then he repeated "choo-choo train" three times as though it were a song. They also used a great many imitative sounds. One boy was looking at pictures of boats at a campsite and started pretending the boat was going across the lake, and said, "Zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom." In the story retelling session, one boy was looking at a picture of George, the monkey, walking away, and said, "And there he goes. Hmmmmmmm." The sound effect went from a high to a low pitch. Another child was looking at a picture

Table 3

Language Play and Variation in Intonation Contours

| In Conversation |
| --- |
| (Looking at picture of fish) "Mik mik mik mak, mik mik mik mak." (All the mik's are a higher pitch than the mak's.) |
| "Sun shines waayyy back there." Way is lengthened considerably and starts with high pitch and goes to low. |
| (Looking at picture of trailer boats) "Trailer boats, trailer boats, trailer boats." (First trailer boats is high, second one lower, and third one normal pitch.) |
| **In Story Retelling** |
| "There he goes, really, real tight, way up in the sky. Up in the air." (By tight, the child means that he's hanging on tightly./ There has extra lengthening. Way and up are both in a high pitch that falls by the end of the phrase, and both phrases are lengthened somewhat.) |
| "And he called up it and the line and ding, ding, and he said, 'orboo, orboo.'" |
| "And there's his mama shoes and there's his mama bananas and mama peaches. And that's his mama telephone." |
| "And the man can....up up up up up up up up up up up up." (The up's start with low pitch and gradually get higher.) |

of a number of boats, and instead of saying there were a lot of boats, he said, "There's another ship, 'nother ship, 'nother ship, 'nother ship, 'nother ship."

I am not sure that this aspect of their language can be interpreted, except that it does seem to reflect an uninhibited, relaxed, playful attitude about language that the non-Indian children did not have, either those at Yakima or Palo Alto.

Lack of Polite Phrases

Several years ago I conducted an informal survey among older Yakima Indians to find out what courtesy forms they had, and what they would be most likely to say under a variety of circumstances. I discovered that they have no translation equivalents for please, thank you, you're welcome, excuse me, I'm sorry, etc. The concept, of course, can be translated. For thank you, the man who was my regular informant, told me he would say, "You have made me very happy." But there is nothing comparable to such courtesy routines in Sahaptin. In certain cases, such as to express regret about something, informants told me they wouldn't say anything, but would touch a person's arm, or give some simple physical demonstration of their feeling.

In all of the recording I did with the Yakima children, I didn't ever hear one of these English courtesy forms. The children asked a good many direct questions, such as "What's your name?" and made direct requests, such as "Hand me that," but such requests were never accompanied by polite forms.

It is not a question of whether or not a child knows the meaning of the lexical items, thank you, please, or whatever. It is a question of whether such routines are considered an essential, or even desirable, part of the culture. One can see that when the child leaves his own culture for the first time and goes off to school, he may face a problem. It might be said that he has different sequencing rules than his teacher does. Sequencing rules are found in linguistic routines such as greeting and parting rituals and often require that a person complete the routine in a particular way. Such is the case in the middle-class white culture when a child is given a gift, for example, and fails to say "Thank you." The parent often responds with "What do you say?" The child is expected at a very age to have such routines well learned.

Formal Register Differences

It was noted above that when the children conversed with me their speech conformed more nearly to the standard dialect than when they were retelling the story, thus indicating their awareness of the differences. (The retelling of the story was an exciting event for the Yakima children, though it gave no evidence of being such for the non-Indian children. See Labov 1972, for a discussion of the significance of such task-dependent variation in speech.) There was little other opportunity or or necessity for them to vary the formality of their language in this setting--the informal, home-like atmosphere of the Head

Start Program, with its Yakima leaders. However, I had observed a dramatic difference in the language behavior of the Yakima children when I visited some first-grade classrooms. Here the Yakimas became the much-written-about "silent Indian child." When asked to speak, their voices were soft and hesitant. They didn't volunteer to speak. One teacher had instigated a policy of having the children given reports at lunchtime. One child would talk while the other children were eating at their desks, in order to give the Yakimas more practice speaking. At the Head Start Program, no one needed any practice in speaking--only a chance! They all wanted to talk. They fought over who would be next to talk into the microphone. Talking was a lot of fun. However, there were other places in the Yakima community where the children again were "silent Indian children." This was when they were attending tribal meetings with their parents, or attending religious services, or any number of other kinds of meetings. By and large, children were expected to go wherever their parents went, and the parents could count on the child to remain silent in this formal setting. It appears that children have interpreted the school room with its quiet, formal atomsphere as a place requiring their formal speech register--the register that consists almost entirely of remaining silent. Some teachers in this area have recently tried a more informal approach in their classrooms, and the results have been gratifying.

## Conclusions

In listening carefully to the speech of the Yakima children and to an equal number of non-Indian children, we find that there are characteristics of the speech of the Yakima children that are not found systematically in the speech of the non-Indian children. These characteristics set their speech apart as a dialect. There are at least two reasons to assume that these dialect features, particularly the phonological features, will disappear as the children get older: (1) they demonstrate an awareness of the forms of standard English by using them more frequently in careful speech than in rapid, excited speech, and (2) the Yakima adults do not have a noticeable dialect.

It should be mentioned that some of the phonological features of the speech of the Yakima children may be thought of as immaturities, inasmuch as any of them may be found in the speech of other children from other English-speaking areas, both from standard-speaking homes and non-standard speaking homes. Speech immaturities are to be expected in the age range of four to six years and even older.

It doesn't seem likely that the phonological aspects of the Yakima children's dialect could be considered a 'language problem' that would cause them to do poorly in school. From my experience in visiting some classrooms attended by the Yakima children, and from teachers' reports, I don't believe the other aspects of the children's dialect, discussed in this paper, have ever been observed in the classrooms. Whereas at preschool ages, in an

informal, non-threatening atmosphere, even with a non-Indian adult (myself) in charge, these Yakima children were more verbal, more eager to talk, both in conversation and in story telling than non-Indian children of the same age, in the classroom the Yakimas' intonation patterns were flat. They didn't use language creatively or use a large number of direct quotations. They had apparently interpreted the classroom situation as requiring their most formal register--silence. The talkative, happy child who loves to play with language has become "the silent Indian child". He has no other classroom speech register available to him.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has, in recent years, recommended that classroom teaching methods should be adapted to the needs of the children attending that classroom. However, the attitudes in most of the schools I visited was "Let the children adjust to us. We do not intend to change our ways to suit them." A few classrooms, mostly on an experimental basis, have tried a less formal atmosphere--more opportunity to work in small groups instead of as the room as a whole--more chance to ask the teacher questions privately instead of in front of the whole class--more opportunities for self-direction, etc.--and the Indian children have demonstrated their considerable verbal abilities and have kept pace with the other children in the class.

The general attitude of the school personnel in the area represents the principal non-language problem mentioned above, and is, in turn, a factor in the 'language problem' they refer to.

The classroom represents a foreign situation to the Yakima Indian child and he cannot be expected to develop a new speech register instantaneously to deal with it. Neither can we easily teach it to him. We can help a child learn new vocabulary items. We can help with pronunciation. But we know very little about teaching methods for many other aspects of language, particulary where it concerns language usage rather than structure.

When the classrooms are changed sufficiently to make use of registers already available to the Yakima child, he will surprise a great many individuals with his language capabilities.

## Footnotes

[1]This research was supported in part by the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund of Stanford, California.

The author wishes to thank Roger Jim, Sr., Chairman of the Health, Employment, Welfare, Recreation and Youth Activities Committee of the Yakima Tribal Council for his permission to work with the children in the Head Start Program, and Florence Haggerty, teacher in charge of the Toppenish Head Start Program who generously made space and time available for the research with the Yakima children. Thanks are also due to Susan Gouner, first-grade teacher at Raynor School, Sunnyvale, California, for her assistance and cooperation in allowing the author to work with the children in her classroom.

## References

Labov, William. "The Study of Language in its Social Context." In Advances in the Sociology of Language, Vol. 1, edited by Joshua A. Fishman. The Hague: Mouton, 1971, pp. 152-216.

Rey, H. A. Curious George. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941.